

Cumberland County Natural Area Inventory

UPPER CAPE FEAR RIVER MACROSITE Significant Natural Heritage Area

The Upper Cape Fear River Macrosite is located along a 64-mile stretch of the river, extending from the highway NC 24 bridge (at the mouth of Cross Creek) upstream into Harnett, Lee, and Chatham counties. Within the Cumberland County portion, the macrosite includes nine standard sites and one site of county significance. One of these sites, Upper Cape Fear River Aquatic Habitat, incorporates the river channel itself, while the other nine occur on adjacent slopes and uplands. In this section the Cape Fear River is notable for being entrenched within the landscape; that is, it lies well below the general level of land, a feature shared by no other river in the North Carolina Coastal Plain. Slopes ranging up to 100 feet high occur along the Cumberland County portion of the river, with the highest at Old Bluff Church and just south of Methodist College. As a consequence of the entrenchment, tributaries have also cut deeply into the sand and clay soils to form many small to sizeable ravines. These tributaries are notable for another geomorphic feature which is very rare in the Coastal Plain: waterfalls. At least 15 have been documented and although most are less than 10 feet high, Carver's Falls is 20 feet high (and over 100 feet wide!) and the falls at Clark Park is 35 feet high. Slopes in these tributary ravines and along the river itself support extensive mixed hardwood forests, as elaborated in the following site descriptions.

The macrosite contains the best remaining examples of hardwood forests in the county, a few of which are among the highest quality in the state. These forests support a wide diversity of tree species and provide abundant nuts and fruits for wildlife while at the same time providing nesting habitat for dozens of migratory and resident songbirds. Nowhere in the county do wildflowers put on such a display in the spring as in these woods before canopy leaves have fully grown, with a profusion of violets, trout lilies, mayapples, yellow harlequins, wild geraniums, spring beauties, bellwort, licorice-root, giant starwort, and many others. Two State rare plants occur in these forests: Douglass's bittercress (*Cardamine douglassii*) and eastern isopyrum (*Enemion biternatum*), both more characteristic of Piedmont habitats. Many other species which are rare in the Coastal Plain also occur along the Cape Fear River and its tributaries; they include galax (*Galax urceolata*), mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), Catesby's trillium (*Trillium catesbaei*), featherbells (*Stenanthium gramineum*), and painted buckeye (*Aesculus sylvatica*).